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E-Learning Programs: The Case of Ankara University, Turkey

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Abstract.

This paper aims to evaluate the Human Relations E-Learning Graduate Program of Ankara University, Turkey. Students of this program filled out a questionnaire form which includes both close-ended and open-ended questions. The results of the research revealed that there was a close similarity between the beginning goals of the program and its present situation. It is clear that these kinds of programs provide useful tools for creating a learning society.

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1. Introduction

Education has undergone tremendous changes throughout its history. According to Jarvis (2004), the main reason behind this rests with the idea that knowledge cannot be thought of without the social and economical transformations of both society and the world in general. Adult education, lifelong education, continuous education, distance education, open education and e-learning are some examples of these kinds of transformations. Although many of these concepts are not new, their usage and popularity have been increasing for many decades. In this paper, the Human Relations Graduate Program of Ankara University, Turkey is examined in terms of evaluation research. In order to undertake this analysis, it is necessary discuss some basic concepts of lifelong education, adult education, learning societies and e-learning. There is a strong interrelationship among these concepts.

The concept of adult education has undergone a number of different theoretical debates (Jarvis, 2004). The main focus of the debate revolves around the definition of the term of adult. For example, Wiltshire (1976) claims that adult education can be understood as an educational process, which is conducted in an adult manner. But in this definition, there is a need to clarify the concept of adult. Therefore, he describes an adult as a person who has reached maturity and is over the age of twenty. Another researcher, Paterson (1979), also discusses the concepts of adult. He views adulthood as a status, involving certain responsibilities, which are entered into at a specific age. It can be asserted that his definition depends on biological, sociological and legal bases. He makes a clear distinction

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between adults and children. Contrary to Paterson, Knowles (1980), another important author, puts self-perception at the center of his claim. According to Knowles, if an individual perceives him or herself as an adult, then that individual has the right to be treated as an adult. Therefore, one can say that there is no clear distinction between adulthood and childhood education.

After this brief discussion, it can be asserted that there is no consensus among these authors. In order to overcome this situation, this study assumes that adult education is defined as post-compulsory education and post initial education (Jarvis, 2004). Extending education to the other periods of human life leads to another concept: Lifelong education. According to Knapper and Copley (2000:11-12), this concept implies that the activities of learning are carried out through life. It is a dynamic process entailing day-to-day learning in everyday life. Moreover, it has four distinctive characteristics: "It is intentional—learners are aware that they are learning; It has specific goals, and is not aimed at vague generalizations such as developing the mind; These goals are the reasons why the learning is undertaken (i.e. it is not motivated simply by factors like boredom); The learner intends to retain and use what has been learnt for a considerable period of time".

A closer examination of lifelong education practices may clarify the relationship it has with the policy of creating a learning society. Cara et al. (1998:1-2) define a learning society as a society that "...is much more than a society whose members are simply well educated...It is a place or a society where the idea of learning infuses every tissue of its being: a place where individuals and organizations are encouraged to learn about the dynamics of where they live and how it is changing; a place that on that basis changes the way it learns whether through schools or any other institution that can help foster understanding and learning; a place in which all its members are encouraged to learn; finally and perhaps most importantly a place that can learn to change the conditions of its learning democratically".

One contemporary way of actualizing this kind of society is using "information communication technologies (ICTs) in the area of education. E-learning programs are the most popular practices among these technologies. Debates related to the effectiveness of these programs can be examined by focusing on two topics. Proponents of ICTs assert that ICTs provide the opportunity to participate in educational activities for some parts of the society. On the other hand, opponents claim that instead of creating a more democratic and equal educational sphere for society, these programs only exacerbate the already widening societal gap. However, from a pragmatic view, ICTs and e-learning programs actually make society more equal.

2. Method

This paper aims to examine the effects of the Human Relationship Master Degree Program of Ankara University in order to improve its quality. The researcher will seek to enhance the quality of the participants' evaluations in order to glean more in-depth responses about the program. In other words, this study can be classified as a kind of "evaluation research" into the area of education. According to Gray et al. (2007:350), evaluation research often measures the effectiveness of a program or initiative by comparing its original goals with the actual results.

1.1. *The Human Relations E-Learning Graduate Program of Ankara University*

As the first e-learning graduate program of Ankara University, the Human Relations Program became active in the spring semester of 2010. The duration of this interdisciplinary program is three semesters. During this period, students have to take 33 credits and complete a term project. Furthermore, a one semester scientific preparation program or orientation program is compulsory for students who did not have social science courses, such as sociology or social psychology, during their undergraduate educations. With the exception of the scientific preparation program, there are no compulsory courses. In other words, all of the courses from the graduate program are selective. Applications from any and all undergraduate programs are welcomed.

The courses of this program includes:

Table 1: The list of courses

Graduate courses (Elective)
Societal Structure of Turkey Media and Culture Gender and Human Relations Conflict Resolution Social Change and Technology Political Psychology Social Psychology Intimate Relations Theoretical Bases of Human Relations Behavior and Personality in Working Life Health and Human Relations
Scientific Preparation Courses (Compulsory)
Introduction to Anthropology Introduction to Psychology Introduction to Sociology Sociology of Institutions

Out of 133 registered students, there are 98 active students in this program. The main aim of this paper is to examine these students' evaluations about this program. In relation to this main goal, the sub-aims are as follows:

1. What are the characteristics of the participants?
2. What are the reasons that participants apply to the Master program?
3. What are the participants' opinions regarding the technical quality of program?
4. What are the participants' comments related to the quality of courses?
5. What are the participants' suggestions in terms of improving this program?
6. How do the participants perceive the relationships among themselves and their lecturers?

In order to ascertain this data, a questionnaire was given to the participants. Both open-ended and close-ended questions were asked. Although the questionnaire form was sent by e-mail to all 98 active students (the ones who must finish at least one semester of the program), only 41 forms were returned. As a result, this paper analyzes only the results that were obtained from these 41 participants.

2. Findings and discussion

Out of 41 participants, 27 were female and 14 respondents were male. The average age is 35 years old (max: 56, min: 24, std: 7). With regard to marital status, 22 of the participants are married, 16 are single and three are divorced. The undergraduate programs from which the participants graduated evince strong diversity. There are students from both the natural and social sciences. Since this program does not require a foreign language background, most of the participants (29 respondents out of 41) do not have any document relating to their level of foreign language proficiency (reading, writing and speaking abilities). More than half of them live in Ankara, the city in which the University was founded. In addition to the Ankara residents, there are also residents from the Mediterranean Sea, the Black Sea, Marmara and the Central and Eastern Anatolia regions of Turkey. Almost all of the participants (39 respondents out of 41) work in the public or private sector, or work for themselves. Two of the participants describe themselves as housewives. Little more than half of the participants see themselves at "lower middle strata" (21 participants) and 18 of the participants describe their socio-economic status as "upper middle." Only one participant recorded having "higher socio-economic status."

The answers of 24 participants to the question "why have you applied to a Master degree program", were mostly about making a contribution to their own self-development. 15 participants answered that they were undertaking the program in order to have the opportunity for vertical mobilization. Another question that was asked related to the reason for applying to the Human Relations Program. More than half of the participants (21 respondents) said that

they chose the program because of a personal interest in the subject. The second most popular response, given by 15 participants, had to do with the e-learning nature of the program.

These answers are similar to the basic idea of a “learning society,” which was debated earlier. As an adult education program, the participants accept the Human Relations Graduate Program as a means by which to reach their goals. A quotation from one participant, a 42-year-old woman who works in the public sector, makes this relationship more clear: “I believe that this program adds many things to me. It turned me into a person who read and investigated more than before. It has contributed to my personal development.” Moreover, some participants’ answers to this question can be conceptualized as “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1986). One 38-year-old woman who works in the public sector commented: “I applied to this program because my family believed in the importance of education.”

Almost half of the participants perceived the technical infrastructure of program to be sufficient. However, two participants reacted negatively to this question. The respondents did not believe that the technology used for the program was sufficient. Their main concern was that there were many disruptions during the classes. According to the 37 respondents, the quality of the courses was sufficient. This kind of positive feedback shows that this program has reached its goal. One 39-year-old woman working in the public sector commented: “It is a program that has contributed to my scientific understanding and to my daily life. It has made me evaluate daily life experiences more scientifically. I understand the reasoning behind facts in social life better than before.”

In order to improve the quality of the program, participants’ suggestions were classified according to three topics. One topic related to the technical infrastructure, one related to the courses and the final topic related to social relationships. One woman from the public sector noted: “The technical infrastructure should be improved and supported. There is a need to create a module for the library. In addition to this, information relating to the students should be updated.” Additionally, a 35-year-old woman in the public sector also noted: “Student participation in the courses must be supported. Rather than having examinations, I prefer having a paper for each class.” A 36-year-old self-employed man wrote: “There should be some activities to gather the class, such as picnics, symposiums organized by students, or platforms to solve the problems of students.”

The last quotation also reflects another dimension of e-learning activities. The research revealed that participants both experienced the problem of self-belonging and self-identification. Some respondents said that without face-to-face interactions they could not concentrate on the courses. On the other hand, there are participants who asserted that they solved this problem by using communication technology, such as telephones and social media. Most participants have a group on Facebook. On this platform, they share their experiences and information about the programs, and some lecturers are also the members of this group.

4. Conclusion

This paper examined lifelong learning and education activities, which serve as means to create a learning society. The Human Relations e-Learning Graduate Program of Ankara University, Turkey was put in the spotlight. The initial aim of this program was to provide an opportunity for people who did not have a chance to enter a graduate program, due to various reasons. By using one dimension of distance education—the e-learning program—the Human Relations Graduate Program has been successful and continues to pursue its goals. According to the results of the survey presented in this paper, it is clear that this program has already achieved most of its goals. However, there are still some problems. The researchers hope that this study will be a guide to help the University improve the quality of its program.

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